

## Article

# Three Contemporary Russian Poets and Biblical Tradition: Sergey Zavyalov, Natalia Chernykh, Jaan Kaplinski

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**Abstract:** The poets in question belong to different generations, as well as different cultural, ethnic, and even religious backgrounds. Ethnically Mordvinian Zavyalov (b. 1957), who is also a noted scholar and translator from Ancient Greek and Latin, and ethnically Russian Chernykh (b. 1969), who is trained as a librarian and grew up among hippies, are both Eastern Orthodox Christians. Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021), half Polish and half Estonian, was born and died a Roman Catholic, yet for a considerable part of his life, until his gradual switch from the Estonian language to Russian, considered himself a “pagan.” The article focuses on these poets’ different forms of engagement with the Holy Scripture and practices of the Christian Church. Zavyalov’s groundbreaking experimental poem *Advent: Leningrad, 1941 (Рождественский пост, 2009)* intertwines fragments of liturgical services and recommendations for fasting around the time of Christmas with the voices of the besieged city, dying from famine during WW II. His poem’s cathartic effect is remarkable: the death is negated by Christ’s birth and history starts anew. His most recent poem *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ (Я видел Иисуса: и Он был Христос, 2022)*, which will be discussed in this article, engages with the Holy Scripture and the practices of the Russian Orthodox church in an even more direct way. Chernykh’s poetry of recent decades deals with the relevance of the Bible for a practicing Christian in a largely non-Christian world. Furthermore, Kaplinski’s posthumous Russian collection *Winged Fingerprint (Отпечаток крылатого пальца)*, which is to be published in 2022, can be described as a dialog with the Biblical God and death “after the end of everything.” The most prominent voice in Estonian letters, Kaplinski transforms his later lyrical poetry written in Russian into a spirited prayer for the salvation of everything seemingly “insignificant”, left out of “larger history”.

**Keywords:** literature and the Bible; poetics and the Bible; contemporary poetry written in Russian; Sergey Zavyalov; Natalia Chernykh; Jaan Kaplinski



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## 1. The Subject Conspicuously Absent from Academic Discussion

It is considerably difficult to find any academic work, whether in English or Russian, dedicated to the possible engagement of contemporary Russian poetry with biblical tradition. The subject simply has no place in the present-day academic industry influenced predominantly by a vulgar Marxist (one may simply say: pseudo-Marxist) approach, which treats different forms of identity as the major defining factor in the social and therefore political stance of a poet, curiously omitting the poet’s religious identity and various quite autonomous questions of poetics, which may align different authors more than their presumed identities or political views. Moreover, the language of the Old Church Slavonic translation of the Bible—a language which was a literary version of Old Bulgarian and dated back to the times of Sts. Cyril and Methodius—is to a considerable degree a part of the contemporary Russian language use. It shows its presence starting in various forms of the words which Russian preserved in their Old Church Slavonic, not Eastern Slavic, versions (the latter forms are still in use in the closely related Ukrainian and Belorussian languages) and ending with the syntax of literary Russian and various verbal forms, which exist for the written language only and are conspicuously absent from everyday speech. Too

often this Old Church Slavonic (Biblical) heritage is overlooked or taken for granted. Yet, of all Slavic languages only two—Russian<sup>1</sup> and, quite naturally, contemporary Bulgarian—have retained a direct continuity with the medieval Slavic translation of the Holy Scripture.

Thus it goes without saying that many contemporary Russian idioms can be traced back to the Old Church Slavonic version of the Bible. This connection is further fortified by hundreds of words borrowed by Russians from Byzantine Greek (and still pronounced according to the early medieval norm), in other words, taken directly from the language of the mother church, which provided medieval Russia with its version of Christianity.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the comprehensive and accessible history of Russian poetry of the last 50 years has not yet been written, despite at least one very honest and serious attempt to produce a systemic analysis of varied poetical practices of the period (Orlitskii 2021).

While the authors discussed in this article by no means exhaust the subject, i.e., the engagement of contemporary poetry written in Russian with the literary and religious tradition of the Bible, they provide a representative variety of approaches and vouch for the significance if this engagement and the considerable variety of approaches to it.

## 2. Sergey Zavyalov and the Holy Scripture

Sergey Zavyalov, as he spells his name in English, was born in 1958 in the former Imperial suburb of St. Petersburg (and summer residency of the Russian Imperial family), historically known as Tsarskoye Selo (Czar's Village), or Sarskoye Selo. The latter spelling derives from the place's initial name Sarishof, as it was known in the 1710's. In 1936 former Tsarskoye Selo became an administrative part of the city of Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was known during the Soviet era), and in 1937 it was renamed Pushkin, after one of its most famous residents, the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), who from 1811–1817 as a teenager was a student at the state-run elite boarding school for boys, Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum. After World War II the city of Pushkin was distinguished by a strong military presence, especially of artillery and air force units which stood in stark contrast to the strikingly beautiful palaces and parks of the bygone era<sup>2</sup>. As a very young man Zavyalov sought emotional and aesthetic refuge in the museum-like “beautiful” atmosphere of the “Russian Versailles” (Zav'ialov 2018, p. 8). Today Zavyalov is one of the harshest critics of aesthetic escapism.

Zavyalov's father was a painter, and his mother was a daughter of an Imperial artillery officer Ivan Ruda, who joined the revolutionaries (first the Socialist Revolutionary Party, then their political rivals the Bolsheviks), and, prior to his execution in 1938<sup>3</sup>, directed major military factories in Leningrad. Zavyalov's first exposure to religion was through his Mordvinian grandmother (on his father's side)<sup>4</sup>, a devout Eastern Orthodox Christian, who, as Sergey Zavyalov wrote to the author of this essay, “prayed every evening and took me to the church” (Zavyalov 2022).

This was a rather typical situation: my own first encounters with the printed Bible (a worn-out edition of the late nineteenth century) and Christianity were also through my grandmother, a successful chemical engineer, who all her life remained a deeply religious person. Parents of our generation, all of whom grew up immediately before, during, and after WW II, were too busy in pursuing new possibilities open to them in the 1960's.

“Quite possibly,” Zavyalov continues about his initial encounters with the liturgy, “at first it was something like opera (but of a different kind), which my mother took me to. Yet, when I as a young man found myself among church-going intellectuals I could not share their neophyte delight” (Zavyalov 2022).

In 1985 Zavyalov graduated from the Department of Classical Languages of the School of Languages and Literatures of Leningrad (now and during the Imperial period, St. Petersburg) University and, in the years prior to his graduation, joined “Club-81,” an independent writers union in Leningrad, an alternative to existing Soviet structures and active before and during *perestroika*; this led to a delay in the issue of his diploma, which Zavyalov received only in 1987. Upon his graduation he taught Latin, Ancient Greek and Classical

Literature. It was during his student years that Zavyalov composed the poems he considered worthy of preserving (Zavyalov's earliest printed poems date back to 1984 (Zav'ialov 2022)).

Written down according to the orthographic norm that existed in Russia prior to the switch to the so-called new orthography in 1918 (enforced by the Bolshevik government, yet prepared and discussed by Russian linguists years before Lenin and his allies came to power), Zavyalov's early poems presented this break with the thousand year old tradition of writing as something that can be reversed at will. Even now, despite the fact that in 1994 Zavyalov eventually embraced post-1918 orthography, he remains one of the few stubborn supporters of the old norm. His two major poems, *Advent: Leningrad, 1941* (*Рождественский пост*, 2009) and *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ* (*Я видел Иисуса: и Он был Христос*, 2022), contain large sections—all of them quotations from the different church books (the Bible, prayer and liturgy books, recommendations for fasting)—printed according to the old orthographic norm and with letters (ѣ, ѿ, ѵ, оу, etc.) dropped from the present-day Russian alphabet at least one hundred years ago (some, like оу, were not in use since the eighteenth century). Zavyalov's choice testifies, albeit to a limited degree, that the tradition of writing established by Sts. Cyril and Methodius, creators of the Slavic Bible, can be successfully carried on into the twenty-first century. On a purely aesthetic level fragments of the texts, written in an openly archaic orthography in a language only partially intelligible to an average speaker of present-day Russian, play a role similar to the found objects in contemporary art and become a sort of found poetry. When inserted into both poems, those fragments produce a tension between their own elevated style and form (since everything truly old is by default seen as 'elevated' or at least 'beyond lay understanding') and the emotionally charged voices speaking in different versions of the present-day Russian. With considerable ease, indicative of his talent, Zavyalov overthrows one of the firmest conventions of Russian literature: prose, like in the case of polyphonic novels of Dostoevsky, should speak with many voices, including the voice of its author (Bakhtin 1929, 1963, 1984), while poetry is in essence a spirited monologue of a lyrical persona. Prominent twentieth-century Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin believed that "dialogical imagination" defined a good novel and the Russian philosophical-psychological novel in particular (nineteenth-century Russian poetry lacked "dialogical" poets like Robert Browning). Yet, it was during Bakhtin's lifetime that the clear borderline between Russian poetry and prose started to blur. Innokenty Annensky (1855–1909) and Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) were the first to borrow freely from the literary devices employed by Dostoevsky and Chekhov, starting with a 'telling detail' and ending with the distancing of a lyrical persona from the poet to the degree that in each new poem this persona spoke with another voice of another character, not the poet's 'true self.' The further and rather fast disappearance of this borderline, especially among more adventurous authors of the 1990's, 2000's, 2010's, and 2020's, made Russian poetry more 'prose-like,' while Russian prose became more 'poetic,' monological and suggestive (Rybakova 2011; Vishnevskii 2012), with the narrator's voice not truly distinguishable from that of a 'lyrical persona' (Danilov 2010; Kondrat'ev 2020; Gorbunova 2020).

Zavyalov, who started as a lyrical poet, initially wrote in accentual-syllabic rhymed verse, yet soon moved to unrhymed irregular mixed feet which to a degree imitated the quantitative meter of Ancient Greek and Latin poetry, with orthography adhering closely to the pre-1918 standard<sup>5</sup>. I remember reading those unrhymed texts in the *samizdat* publications of the 1980's and their orthography gave them an inimitable aura of otherworldliness and solemnity. Yet, when Zavyalov decided to partially reprint his early poems in 1994 (Zav'ialov 1994) (in any case, *samizdat* publications were not a true 'printing') and then, in their entirety, in 2022 as *Odes 1984–1990* (Zav'ialov 2022), he normalized the orthography and much of the initial effect had been lost. The seemingly complete separation of those poems from the Soviet 'present' was a part of a larger tendency within unofficial Russian culture of the late Soviet period, which aspired to a sort of retrospective—and largely reactionary—cultural (and political) utopia of complete return to the state of things prior

to the Bolshevik takeover of 1917–1918. What was missing from this project was a clear and attractive concept of the future, which had been replaced by an idealized pre-revolutionary Russian past. Social, cultural, and economic counter-revolution of the 1990's, inspired by this utopia, brought a great disappointment and frustration to those who aspired to bridge the gap with the past and gain a fresh and clean start. Moreover, this counter-revolution forced the most sensitive minds to re-evaluate their previous stance. By 1994 Zavyalov was no longer using pre-1918 orthography for his own poems (he partially returned to it in 2009) and in the early March of 2012, at an international conference in Geneva he delivered a devastating critique of the prevailing trend inside the Soviet counterculture of the 1970's and 1980's (to which he himself had belonged). Zavyalov aptly labeled this trend as “retro-modernism” (Zav'ialov 2013). He described the atmosphere among independent poets of the period as pervaded by “depressive resignation and psychopathic resentment” towards everything contemporary leading to a “cultural revanchist approach,” the glorification of the social injustices of Imperial Russia (and therefore seeing the Revolution of 1917–1918 as just a wrong episode) and widely spread view of a common man as *Untermensch* (Zav'ialov 2013, pp. 35–36). Not everyone who read the transcripts of this conference was pleased with Zavyalov's analysis, yet it is hard to separate it from what transpired during the 1990's, including the inability of the key exponents of the “retro-modernist” aesthetics to produce anything of a lasting significance after they were granted complete freedom of expression and their own reactionary utopia became the official ideology of the country. Olga Sedakova (b. 1949), a poet much loved by the Slavists and described by Zavyalov as “the brightest figure among the Moscow retro-modernists” (Zav'ialov 2013, p. 36), became quite irritated with Zavyalov's talk, yet the truth was that Sedakova had not published a single significant poem since the early 1990's, while younger poets, like Zavyalov, found their true voice only after a complete break with all the illusions of the previous period.

As for Zavyalov's own development, he gradually moved from pure lyricism to epic poetry. He explored free verse, prose poem, and found poetry and paraphrased classical Russian poems either in free verse or in mixed feet. He also gave a closer look to his own Mordvinian roots and even wrote poetry that combined both the Russian and the Mordvinian languages (even more so than in the concluding section of his latest narrative poem *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ*, Appendix A). He shifted away from the Christian faith of his earlier years, yet without fully embracing a Finno-Ugric version of paganism (once described by Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski as “better faith in a bush or a tree than in anything transcendental”), and finally returned to the Eastern Orthodox Church. However, the most important change in his worldview occurred with the acceptance of Marxist social and economic analysis, which was quite reprehensible to the majority of his friends of previous years, yet an analysis sympathetic to and centered on the common man. He initially thought Marxist analysis to be incompatible with Christianity, but later decided that Christianity and Marxism are simply dealing with different realms of existence. For his aversion to various forms of “cultural Marxism” Zavyalov is sometimes labeled a “palaeo-Marxist.” His unique combination of Marxist analysis and Christianity is “not a liberation theology but something more fundamental, which Biblical prophets spoke about” (Zavyalov 2022). Today he defines himself as simply a “parishioner of the Russian Orthodox Church” who sees “Catholics as brothers [and sisters] and Muslims as cousins” (Zavyalov 2022).

The true Hegelian synthesis of both stages of his creative and intellectual development came in 2009, when Zavyalov wrote *Advent: Leningrad, 1941* (Zavyalov 2017) (original Russian title: *Рождественский пост* (Zav'ialov 2018, pp. 171–200), meaning “Christmas Fasting”), a tragic and deeply touching narrative of the worst weeks of the Finno-German siege of the former Imperial capital of St. Petersburg, renamed from 1924–1991 Leningrad (“the city of Lenin”), during WW II, when hundreds of thousands of the civil population died of starvation. Ironically, this period coincided in 1941 with fasting before Christmas, according to the calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church. In *Advent: Leningrad, 1941* the author's own voice is presented through a large lyrical poem composed in unrhymed ir-

regular mixed feet (much in the manner of Zavyalov's early poetry) which describes a magnificent cityscape covered with snow and which is continuously interrupted by the voices of common people dying of hunger, by fragments of a research paper on dystrophy, and by the decisions of the city's authorities about the rationing of the scarce food. Each of the seven chapters of the poem is framed by the weather report at the beginning and official releases of the Soviet Informational Bureau and quotes from the church services in the end. *Advent's* cathartic effect is remarkable: the death is negated by Christ's birth and history starts anew. The entire text of this narrative poem has been set to music by Sergei Akhunov (b. 1967) in a form of oratorio in 2018, and Akhunov's work was premiered with considerable success on 29 November 2021 in Moscow<sup>6</sup>.

Zavyalov's most recent narrative poem *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ* (2022) is a sequence of six stories inspired by the Gospels: well-known episodes from the New Testament are replayed through the dialog between a male and a female narrator (not to be confused with the author) and the voice, which challenges him or her: sometimes, according to Zavyalov's own admission, it is the voice of God, or God's angel, or—in one instance—Satan. While the narrator's voice is presented in irregular mixed feet, the challenging voice of the other is presented in free verse. The things are further complicated by the use of direct or slightly altered quotations from the Holy Scripture and the Koran in the narrator's part of each episode. Each of the six parts of *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ* starts with a quotation from the Gospels that provides a brief summary of what will be discussed and ends with a quotation from the Eastern Orthodox church service or prayer, something very similar to the structure of each episode found in Zavyalov's *Advent*. In terms of "dialogical imagination" *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ* is probably the most dialogical text ever composed by Zavyalov. As such it is already an oratorio without music (and probably in no need of music), with two soloists in each episode (and different voices speaking through them), and a sort of orchestra at the beginning (the opening quotation from the New Testament in each episode), tuning the entire vocal-instrumental ensemble, and a sort of choir at the end (a prayer). The narrator's voices represent, in order, somebody living up in the mountains, possibly the author himself, since Zavyalov currently is a resident of Winterthur, Switzerland<sup>7</sup> (episode **I. Transfiguration of Jesus**); a confused sick woman of loose morals (episode **II. Saint Veronica**); a privileged young man annoyed by the necessity of renting three fourths of his inherited real estate (family house) to the "uncultured" émigrés "from the Oriental countries" (episode **III. The Rich Young Man**<sup>8</sup>); a Muslim Uzbek guest worker—truck driver somewhere in Central Russia—working at the moment for miserable pay, yet hoping for the protection and mercy of Allah<sup>9</sup> who saves a bleeding Russian that he saw on the side of the road abandoned by those who robbed and tried to kill him (episode **IV. The Good Samaritan**); a working-class woman whose much-wanted son has cerebral palsy (episode **V. Healing the Paralytic**); and a Mordvinian peasant tractor driver, who witnessed a brutal killing of somebody by an armed gang (the tractor driver, killers, and their victim occasionally speak Mordvinian, yet the episode may be understood without any knowledge of the language), seemingly for no reason (episode **VI. Christ Carrying the Cross**).

This gallery of social, cultural, religious, and ethnic types is quite impressive. They are confronted by equally varied voices of the 'others': the poetic mountain-dweller by a voice asking what (if anything) he is ready to die for, the sick confused woman by a voice asking if she could define true love, the rich young man by a voice asking if he is ready to lose not only his dwelling place but his most prized possessions, which define him as a privileged intellectual (a collection of silent films and rare musical records, poetry books in uncommon languages), the Uzbek truck driver by a voice describing an impending final war of everybody against everybody, a suffering working-class mother by somebody quoting to her various ideas from contemporary cultural theory, a village tractor driver by the tempting questions about his readiness to die with no reward for his life and complete oblivion afterwards. Yet, all these types have something in common: despite their confusion, at times horror, and often despair, they know that they have witnessed something

very important which will change their lives forever: they—in one way or another—met Jesus and realized that He was their true Savior and Messiah.

*I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ* is an absolutely unique work in the present-day field of Russian poetry and cannot be compared to anything else. Long before composing this poem, Zavyalov was already known for finding unusual approaches to well-known subjects (which he so impressively demonstrated in dealing with the Siege of Leningrad in *Advent*). For Zavyalov the New Testament is a text about us, our challenges and tribulations. He approaches the Bible as “first the foundation of our civilization, second the greatest literary monument, third (yet not in a hierarchical sense) the way to God. [...] Contemporary Russian poets, who entered literature from the late 1980’s on, lack serious engagement with the Bible (not with religion but with the Bible), especially in comparison with the [poets of the] previous period of the mid-1950’s–mid-1980’s [...]” (Zavyalov 2022). *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ* is an ambitious attempt to restore this engagement to its fullest.

### 3. The World Seen through the Biblical Lens: Natalia Chernykh

Yet, it is hard to fully agree with Zavyalov’s rather grim assessment of present-day Russian poetry’s engagement with the Bible (or rather lack of it): there are a few notable exceptions to this state of affairs, one of them being Natalia Chernykh.

The glass may be half-empty for Zavyalov, yet for a less critical eye it is half-full. As Natalia Chernykh insists, “[t]he Biblical element is very strongly present in the literature, especially in the Russian literature” (Chernykh 2022).

What is even more surprising is that Zavyalov knows her poetry very well: he wrote a preface to one of Chernykh’s better poetry collections *In Praise of Insomnia* (*Похвала бессоннице*, Moscow, 2009) (Chernykh 2009, pp. 7–11). Yet, it may well be the singularity of her voice and the inability to classify it that sets her quite apart from anybody else, including ‘Christian existentialists’ of the older generation, like Sergei Stratanovsky (b. 1944). This problem is dealt with in Zavyalov’s preface: “[H]er poetry is too far from the retro-modernist heroics of [spiritual] resistance [to everything contemporary], and from, in essence, comfortable magnificence and transgressive intentions” (Chernykh 2009, p. 8). According to Zavyalov, Natalia Chernykh’s poetry and her worldview are defined by the three deeply felt and easily detectable (yet not so easily definable) elements: its national character (*народность*), strong religious feeling, and realism (Chernykh 2009, pp. 8–10). In one of the two opening elegies from *In Praise of Insomnia* (*On Dates: Date Two/К свиданиям: второе*) we see a remarkable fusion of all three elements. The subject of this poem is the stroll of a lyrical persona with unnamed “he” in Sokolniki, one of the several historical parks in Moscow, a former falcon hunting forest of the Grand Dukes and Czars of Muscovy. Unlike parks in the Central and Western Europe or even in St. Petersburg and its suburbs (including Tsarskoye Selo), major parks in Moscow are chunks of previously wild nature and as such preserved more of a national character than the contemporary cosmopolitan metropolis itself. For a lyrical persona such a visit is indeed a reunification with the natural and the national, yet in a very sober way (Zavyalov calls it “realism”). Contemplation of formerly wild nature with perennial clouds hovering over Moscow (this city has no more than 60 sunny days each year) triggers in her mind references to nature in the New and Old Testaments (Revelation 10:6 and Genesis 8:13), both dealing with the destruction of the ‘old’ and creation of a ‘new’ land and new sky with the help of water, which, in its turn, triggers the image of the distant Baltic Sea and the cloudy sky over St. Petersburg (Moscow is hundreds of miles away from any sea and is surrounded by woods, rivers, and occasional swamps). Chernykh does not just quote from the Bible, she sees the world through the biblical lens, and we, together with her, witness the beginning of something very important:

When we go to Sokolniki I will forget  
the unbearable pressure of memories, and all of a sudden, the image  
of wretched reality

will move and take off like a crane wedge,  
 [...]
 the events will lose their heavy weight forever,  
 as it has been promised in the Revelation,  
 and there should be time no longer.  
 When we go to Sokolniki  
 (and travel through space with no time with a lightness of an arrow),  
 we will see the swollen April sky over the Baltic Sea  
 which existed before the separation of earthly and heavenly waters,  
 a sky over Noah's dwelling place before the waters retreated.  
 (Chernykh 2009, p. 21)

This is a true beginning of the new world and new feelings, although the word “love” is never mentioned and the poem's lyrical persona understands that those feelings may not be mutual: “[B]ecause I fit you like opium fits the blood [i.e., doesn't fit at all],/and I need *you*, not your time and certain glory” (Ibid.). The ending is even more remarkable: if the feelings are destined to be one-sided, let the nature, not the poet engage in lamenting.

Only the leaves of linden-trees in Sokolniki  
 continue their plaintive funeral chant.  
 I thought it should be solemn and strong.  
 (Ibid.)

This poem, written in a combination of irregular mixed feet and free verse with occasional rhymes, is very typical of Chernykh's mature style: clear, direct, emotionally charged, using the Bible as an endless resource of images and inspiration, and yes, very national in its feeling.

Natalia Chernykh was born in 1969 in Chelyabinsk-65 (in 1994 renamed Ozyorsk), a closed mid-size city in the lower part of the Southern Ural Mountains region which was built for those who worked in the Soviet nuclear industry. As Chernykh recollected: “Both of my parents worked for the defense industry, the city was known as a ‘P. O. Box’ and had many residents, who were born in Moscow and Leningrad. As a result, many of my parents' friends were people of mostly intellectual aspirations. Many of them were communists, yet almost everybody was baptized as an Orthodox Christian. My mother, a head of the engineering department, read the Bible at her workplace with little precaution. Since my father was from the Cossack family, his idea of religion had to do with being true ‘Russian.’ Everything solemn for him was divine. And what could be more solemn than the Eucharist? Yet he didn't become a believer. [...] I have always been reading the Gospels, even in my most tempestuous years of youth” (Chernykh 2022).

After her parents' separation in 1981 and their subsequent divorce in 1982, she moved to L'viv, Western Ukraine (1985–1986), while her mother, also living and working in Western Ukraine, contemplated the possibility of becoming a nun. In 1987 Natalia Chernykh relocated to Moscow. Although she briefly attended a college in L'viv, majoring in library science, most of her education was through her own reading. She worked as a librarian at the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute, a technician at the Soyuzmulfilm (Soviet Animation Film) Studios, a schoolteacher, and a translator and internal reviewer for the major Russian publishing houses. During her early years in Moscow, she sold books in the streets, often in very cold weather, which seriously damaged her health. It was from the late 1980's on that Chernykh got involved with hippies. Furthermore, she wrote poetry.

Her first four printed collections of poetry — *Shelter* (*Приют*, 1996), *Residence Permits* (other possible translation: *Views on Life; Видь на жительство*, 1997), *Saturday of Souls* (*Родительская суббота*, 1999), *Silent Holiday* (*Тихий праздник*, 2002)—were remarkable, yet in a different way than her more mature output. They signaled flexible and sensitive talent, able to go easily into the most difficult modes of expression, such as automatic writing (all prose fragments in *Residence Permits* and some of the poems too), while yet retaining remarkable facility and ‘sweetness’ of expression. Combined with the fact that those

poems were written by a practicing Christian (one of the very few among Moscow poets of her generation), something that was obvious for anybody, who read those collections (given their limited run, mostly other Moscow literati), their author appeared as a person capable of larger achievements in the future and still happily young at heart.

Literary maturity has nothing to do with biological age and may arrive earlier or much later, or never arrive at all. In the opening elegy (*On Dates: Date One/К свиданиям: первое*) from Chernykh's absolutely mature poetry collection *In Praise of Insomnia* (2009) a lyrical persona/poet, now in her late thirties, speaks of herself as being still "too young at heart" (Chernykh 2009, p. 20).

From the mid-2000's on fearless self-criticism and rather harsh self-assessment (which Christians promptly call humility) would be an integral part of her writing which, combined with growing mastery and ability to speak in a matter-of-fact way about the most difficult subjects, will make Natalia Chernykh one of the key Russian poets alive.

Yet, before discussing Chernykh's present poetry a few more words should be said about her earlier work. The poems comprising her first four printed collections read as a rather spontaneous account of the author's personal and religious life and her aesthetic interests, with a quite predictable emphasis on folk rock (*Simon & Garfunkel* (Chernykh 1997, pp. 12, 25)) and progressive rock (*King Crimson* (Chernykh 1997, pp. 30–33)), all too predictable for the young Moscow intellectual of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet era<sup>10</sup>, although she also composed a rather surreal verse play *Etude* about Mussorgsky and Pushkin (Chernykh 2002, pp. 55–65). Nature, when it appears in her early work, is tamed and safe, and even wild animals speak with familiar and not in any sense threatening voices of their domesticated relatives (or the voices we, humans, ascribe to them—those of slightly deranged women and men), like in her early narrative poem *The Territory of Beasts* (Chernykh 1996, pp. 37–49). Chernykh initially wrote in charming accentual-syllabic, mostly unrhymed, yet occasionally rhymed, verse, and gradually progressed to freer verse (first to mixed feet, then to *vers libre*) which was more or less expected from a poet of her generation. Moreover, a carnal aspect of human existence is suspiciously absent from the poems included into those collections, as if, if we are to quote Eastern Orthodox Hymns of Ascent, known to any church-going Eastern Christian (hymns, quoted by Zavyalov in his *I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ*), "[f]rom the years of my youth,/[not too] many passions combat[ted] me." Those are the poems of an author very much at peace with herself and the word around her.

Since I followed Chernykh's creative evolution closely, I remember when the change of heart occurred. In 2006 she posted online a newly composed poem *Сатена (Камена)*, a 14 line-long monologue of an Ancient Roman prophetic deity (a character with enormous personal significance for Chernykh), who spoke to some Russian poet (a rather collective image) in rhymed and slightly irregular anapestic tetrameter (a meter that sounded less mechanical to a Russian ear than, say, iambic tetrameter widely used in the Russian poetry from the middle of the eighteenth-century on). Everything was unusual about this poem, from its slightly bewildering title to a strangely prophetic and solemn tone. In word-for-word translation, without any attempts to retain meter (except for the first line) and rhyme, the poem reads:

I'm a Russian Camena and misery's bread,  
 inspiration controls my fingers,  
 I am as cold as one's instincts and as hot as revelation,  
 I used to be human, now I am in a state-before-resurrection,  
 I am just a Camena, a gift and a reward,  
 I used to live in the ruins of hell<sup>11</sup>.  
 Now listen and write it down, for it hasn't transpired yet,  
 and not everybody is God's poet:  
 my appearance [here] is for some reason,  
 I am Camena, a state-before-resurrection.  
 I hang as Damocles' steel over you,



o poet, and pierce you like a brace soldier's [shoulder],  
 for you are of God's will and eternal,  
 you are poetry's liver and heart<sup>12</sup>.  
 (Chernykh 2007, p. 7)

I am not aware of any other Russian poem of the period that captured a truly tectonic shift in the culture of the mid-2000's. Old paradigms and modes of expression—late Soviet language and thinking (be it a thinking of those who were nostalgic for the Soviet times, or of a large group of those who were nostalgic for now largely imaginary Imperial times<sup>13</sup>) which still dominated the post-Soviet period (and which Chernykh poetically describes as the “ruins of hell”), should be discarded without any pity. A new language, a new vision, adequate to the challenges of contemporary times (which Chernykh calls “a state-before-resurrection,” or “предвоскресенье” in Russian, a word she borrowed, to my great surprise, from Igor-Severyanin<sup>14</sup>) and the not so distant future (equaled to the resurrection and blossoming of true life), should be established. The poet's tone in this poem is both prophetic and severe: in the final four lines she compares herself to a “Damocles' steel” (a reference to both the Ancient Greek sword of Damocles and Damascus steel of the Middle Ages) hanging over contemporary poetry. Only very few poets (including Chernykh herself) were able to acknowledge the new challenge they were facing back then. The aforementioned Zavyalov's talk in Geneva was very much a part of the same tendency: a final farewell to the illusions (and delusions) of the previous decades.

But why Camena? Chernykh's poem is very likely a reference to an unfinished poem by Vladislav Khodasevich (a favorite poet of Jaan Kaplinski) which he worked on in 1938 (Khodasevich 1996–1997, vol. 1, pp. 370–71) in anticipation of the bicentennial of the first Russian poem composed in rhymed iambic tetrameter, Mikhailo Lomonosov's *Ode Dedicated to the Blessed memory of the Sovereign Empress Anna Ioannovna on the Occasion of Victory over Tatars and Turks and the Capture of the City of Khotin* (Ода блаженныя памяти Государыне Императрице Анне Иоанновне на победу над турками и татарами и на вятие Хотина, 1739) (Lomonosov 1950–1983, vol. 8, pp. 16–30). Like Lomonosov's famous *Ode*, Khodasevich's unfinished tribute is also composed in iambic tetrameter, and its fourth stanza reads in word-for-word translation:

This day Russian Camena  
 Has climbed the snowy hills  
 And spoke to her distant sisters  
 With a wonderful voice.  
 (Khodasevich 1996–1997, vol. 1, p. 370)

Chernykh's Camena speaks to those who are rather close (most likely, to her sisters-and-brothers-in-poetry) and her voice is no longer “wonderful” or pleasant.

From now on Natalia Chernykh was composing poetry for the forthcoming future, not for the time being.

Her most remarkable printed collections to date are *In Praise of Insomnia* (2009) and *Screening Before the Release* (Закрытый показ, 2018).

*In Praise of Insomnia*, published in the respected “Russian Gulliver” poetry series<sup>15</sup>, presents a panorama of sleepless and therefore constantly alerted mind and everything it reflects: suburbs and parks of Moscow, lakes, rivers, woods of larger Russia (with forays into imaginary Japan and Ancient Ireland), love, faith, Nature (with the capital N), which is no longer tamed, but magnificent and strong. The poet's voice attains at times incredible power, driven by a creative impulse to improve the world around her (and thus complete the work started by its Divine Creator), that is, ultimately through deeply felt love, which, in Dante's words, moves the sun and other stars (*l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*).

In *Screening Before the Release*, brought out by a major publishing house *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (*New Literary Review*, which also publishes a quarterly periodical of the same title), Chernykh previews with her trusted audience—her readers—certain poetic practices and modes of expression before releasing them for the general audience. Since

*Screening Before the Release* was printed in 300 copies only, the book's run perfectly fits its title. (Yet, it is a pity that a book of such a remarkable achievement and power has such a limited run.)

*Screening Before the Release* contains a few texts, which are already among Chernykh's great achievements. All the poems are written in mostly unrhymed free verse, with sporadic return to mixed feet and rhyme and occasional repetition of groups of words and epithets (an artistic device similar to the ones used in both folklore and musical composition).

Chernykh continues the prophetic line of *Camena* with a rather odd, yet very powerful elegy entitled *Cassandra* (*Кассандра*) (Chernykh 2018, pp. 53–55) which presents the great Trojan priestess of Apollo at the moment of her rest from prophesying the things, in which nobody believes, and her turn to cleaning her altar of sacrificial "blood and grease" (Chernykh 2018, p. 53). It is very tempting to see this poem as a self-portrait of Chernykh, who understands too well that what she is often saying—in her sometimes oblique, sometimes very direct way—her contemporaries cannot listen to and recognize as truth. In this regard Chernykh is not alone: a few other Russian poets share her feeling, yet she is able to articulate it with the uniquely powerful words and images.

*Cassandra* is contrasted with *Agricantina* (*Азрикантина*), an ecstatic ode (very much in the mode of Pablo Neruda), which celebrates the pleasure of good cooking and eating and compares it to the delights of Paradise (Chernykh 2018, pp. 59–62). This is something new for Chernykh, or at least for her lyrical persona, who finally finds the language to describe, with due pleasure and grace, more carnal aspects of human existence.

Those aspects are at full play in rather surreal (but Chernykh carefully avoids this word) narrative in four parts, titled *Supernaturalism, or Social/Sexual Help* (*Супернатурализм, или социальная секс-помощь*), which describes the weird cohabitation of a lyrical persona, who rents a room in the apartment of one of the Moscow literati, with her landlord, a "low type" and narcissist, who continues to live in the same apartment with the purpose of fully and shamelessly exposing his intellectual, emotional, and sexual life to a narrator (Chernykh 2018, pp. 27–36), as if she were not a human being but some otherworldly, almost angelic witness (he, a married man estranged from his wife, is regularly visited by a much younger girlfriend, who comes during the time, when his tenant is home, so that she is made privy to everything between this character and this other woman). As a result, the lyrical persona is forcefully introduced into someone else's life, of which she is unwilling to be a part, yet there is a suspicion that it might have been an unspoken deal from the start, a sort of reversed situation with the inquisitive reader, who now crosses the virtual borderline between himself and his favorite poet and demands to listen to his own story. The outside, real and natural, world is internalized and—because of that—becomes surreal and supernatural. This verse narrative, a truly masterful and fearless work, paves the way for Chernykh's three best narrative poems, which conclude *Screening Before the Release* with a powerful crescendo: *Shaheedah*, *Travels of a Hearing-Impaired Female*, and *Noah's Bus*.

*Shaheedah*, or *Илaxудка* (pronounced *shaheedkah*) in Russian (this is the original title of this narrative poem (Chernykh 2018, pp. 115–20)) is a female Muslim witness of/martyr for true faith. In the present-day Russian this word usually describes a female suicide bomber (during the 1990's and 2000's, in the time of and immediately after the First and the Second Chechen Wars Russia witnessed a number of suicide bombings, including a few devastating attacks in the permanently crowded Moscow subway). The poem itself is the story of a certain Liliya or Liya (the latter name is a Russian version of the biblical Leah), an acquaintance of a lyrical persona, and has a disquieting flavor of the first-hand account (although the lyrical persona learns of the horrifying death of her former classmate from the newspaper). This Liya (baptized as Liliya, which means "lily" in Russian, cf. Song of Solomon 2: 1) is a graduate of the School of Languages and Literatures of the Moscow State University and comes from a Russian family with one Jewish grandmother on her mother's side (which qualified her for aliyah, i.e., repatriation to Israel). As a young rebel<sup>16</sup>, Liliya-

Liya has distanced herself from her parents—and therefore from any interest in Eastern Orthodoxy or Judaism—and passed through infatuation with different fringe ideologies, which speak against “this world,” its “wordy” books and moral “swamp” (Chernykh 2009, pp. 116–17). Liya-Liliya finally found fulfillment in a love affair with a married Muslim man (an attentive reader suspects: a recruiter), who deserted her too, yet now she has changed her name to Leila and is ready to sacrifice her life for true faith. Her final moments are described as a reunification with God in a “happy” Dionysian dance of death. I am not aware of any other contemporary Russian poem that demonstrates so powerfully the dead end of all ideologies, which dominated the country’s public discourse of the 1980’s and 1990’s, and which speaks so powerfully for the necessity of change.

Chernykh was the first poet to openly discuss the psychological roots of political terrorism in post-Soviet Russia, one century after Andrei Bely did that in regard to late Imperial Russia in his great modernist novel *Petersburg* (the protagonist of which, a young man in deep conflict with his parents and hopelessly in love with his best friend’s wife, is manipulated by terrorists into planting a time bomb in the study of an unnamed government official, who turns out to be his own father). *Shaheedah* also registered the deep confusion in the minds of those who came of age in the Russia of the 1990’s, when the official liberal anticommunist (neoliberal, to be more precise) ideology of the government and widely proclaimed freedom of speech and expression went hand in hand with economic ‘reforms’ that made the absolute majority of the country’s population very poor, while allowing a selected few belonging to the ruling elite to privatize enormous amounts of government property, inherited from the Soviet Union, in their own interests. The population aptly named this criminal ‘privatization’ *prikhvatizatsiya* (grabification) and had no kind feelings for members of the ruling elite, who betrayed their fellow citizens and the country. Hence, the temporary rise of all sorts of political radicalism (which eventually subsided) on the fringes of the post-Soviet society.

Chernykh’s second narrative poem at the end of the *Screening Before the Release* collection, *Travels of a Hearing-Impaired Female* (*Путешествия слабослышащей*) describes the largely imaginary world travels of a lyrical persona, who is happily protected from the false and deceptive language of this world by being partially deaf and can only see the world’s positive side and, yes, beauty. In a purely poetic way, it is an antithesis to the suicidal and destructive denial of the world found in *Shaheedah*.

Finally, in *Noah’s Bus* (*Ноев автобус*) one finds a synthesis of pro and contra. From my communication with the author, I know that she attaches particular importance to this narrative poem. The lyrical persona takes a bus, still the most accessible mean of public transportation in Russia, and observes a gallery of attractive and not so pleasant types, who travel with her inside a new Noah’s Ark through the flooded territories of post-Soviet life. This poem is an obvious reference to God’s words to Noah in the Bible, which Chernykh’s considers her continuous source of inspiration (and, as she wrote to me, a “foundation of my writing” (Chernykh 2022)): “Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that *are* not clean by two, the male and his female” (Genesis 7: 2). The lyrical persona does not judge fellow travelers but accepts them as they are on their way to new life and salvation with truly Cristian humility and mercy. In *Noah’s Bus* she reveals herself as a national poet, the one her Russian colleagues may learn a lot from.

Like many other poets, Chernykh has written much more than has made it into her books. *Three Poems* of 2014 (Appendix B), composed in free verse and for some reason not included into any collection of her poems, present Chernykh’s poetic style in its most advanced form. Her heart is no longer with the natural (and the real), which is from now on being constantly transformed into the supernatural (which, in its turn, verges on the dream-like and surreal). A series of references to the Old Testament in the first poem *Joseph is Dreaming* (*Иосиф Прекарный видит сны*), then a bridge between the Old and New Testament in the second poem *Night in Ramah* (*Ночь в Раме*), and finally the author’s Christian sensibility combined with Russian folk wisdom in the third poem *Diocletian’s*

*Gold* (Диоклетианово золото) are like the seeds thrown into the fertile soil of poet's creativity; they grow into new, unheard of plants of imagination. Although the result seems to be rather close to automatic writing (which Chernykh has already practiced in her early poetry collection *Residence Permits*), this similarity is superficial. Each of the three poems is held together by a very clear vision, in which elements, like numerous pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, are randomly mixed and reassembled again, never in the previous, original order. In *Joseph is Dreaming* Pharaoh's (not Joseph's) two separate dreams of skinny and well-fed cows and seven ears of wheat (Genesis 41: 1–7), later interpreted, and therefore correctly "re-dreamed," by Joseph (Genesis 41: 24–33), are indeed separated from each other and inserted—in a reversed order (ears of wheat first, cows second)—into different parts of a poem, and a reader, who is not well-acquainted with the Bible may interpret both "ears of wheat" and "cows" as a continuously surreal flow of Chernykh's imagination; yet this imagination is very much rooted in the biblical text itself. In *Night in Ramah* Rachel—together with the Mother of God—is weeping "for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not" (Matthew 2: 18). Chernykh deliberately gives the wrong number of dead boys birthed by the Old Testament Rachel (in order to destabilize the readers, making them pay more attention to what they read, an artistic technique called "defamiliarization" and introduced into Russian literature by Count Leo Tolstoy): instead of Joseph and Benjamin, she speaks of five (!) sons. The figures do not match, even if we count Jesus, whose birth is described in the words of the Holy Virgin (the concluding words of a poem) "the Nativity of your son and of Mine." Finally, in *Diocletian's Gold* we have a poetic commentary on the words of Christ: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22: 21). The Caesar in Chernykh's poem is Diocletian, a "sword of [pagan] gods," famous for his brutal prosecution of Christians. Diocletian's appearance in full imperial glory is expected to shine "like gold." Yet, any Russian reader of this remarkable poem knows the saying: "Not everything that glitters is gold." The Bible for Chernykh is an endless resource of powerful images, a lens, which improves her vision of the world. "The Bible," summarizes Chernykh, "is clearly a book of poetry. Even chronicles and parables in it resemble poetic texts. And the fact that humanity divides biblical texts into verses, and liturgical texts into fragments from the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles (approximately: stanzas), suggests that we perceive the Bible as the most poetic of all poetic books" (Chernykh 2022).

#### 4. Life-Long Fighting with and Longing for Absolute: Jaan Kaplinski

Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021) presented probably the most unusual and unique approach to a dialog with biblical tradition in present-day Russian letters. To start with, he is known as the most important poet in the Estonian language, the creator of modern Estonian literary idiom, who gave contemporary poetry in this language facility and sophistication comparable to the best achievements of any other poetry composed in the twentieth century in major European languages.

Since I have no knowledge of Estonian I will limit my further discussion to the poems that Kaplinski produced in Russian, his second or third language (he claimed the Võro language, a dialect version of Southern Estonian, to be his first language and literary Estonian, based on Northern Estonian, a second one<sup>17</sup>). Like tens of millions of other non-Russian citizens of the former Soviet Union Kaplinski knew Russian from his early years, yet he consciously made literary Estonian his key medium for the most part of his life. Moreover, as Kaplinski confessed to me in 2015, during our only meeting<sup>18</sup>, he treated literary Estonian very much as a futuristic project (in the same manner as Velimir Khlebnikov treated Russian), full of endless possibilities.

Kaplinski was born in Tartu on 22 January 1941, a few months after Estonia became a part of the Soviet Union (and in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries it was, for almost 200 years, a part of the Russian Empire) to a Polish father and an Estonian mother. He was baptized as Catholic and, as he told me in 2015, his name on his baptismal certificate, written in Latin, read "Ioannes Kaplinski." Jan in Polish, Jaan in Estonian, and

Ян, Яан, or even Янь (as Kaplinski sometimes wrote, using the pre-1918 Russian norm) in Russian were, according to his own words, adaptations of his original first name. Kaplinski's father Jerzy Kaplinski (1901–1943) was a linguist, a specialist in Old Church Slavonic, who spent his childhood in Poland and Switzerland (and in St. Petersburg, capital of the Russian Empire too (Kaplinskii 2022, p. 22)), and later attended schools in Moscow and Kiev, eventually graduating from the Warsaw University. Sometime in the early 1910's, according to a poem discussed in this essay (for a full English translation of this and other poems see Appendix C), the Kaplinskis were visited by one of the leaders of the Russian social democrats, a certain Vladimir Ulyanov (more commonly known under his penname Vladimir Lenin), "a person distinguished by good manners" as Jaan Kaplinski describes him with dark irony, who brought "a pound of candies" for Jerzy (which, despite the cult of Lenin and everything related to him in the Soviet Union, did not later save Jerzy Kaplinski from dying in a Soviet prison camp) (Kaplinskii 2014, p. 83). As Jaan Kaplinski explained to me in 2015, his family most likely knew Lenin through Leonid Krasin (1870–1926), an important Russian social democrat, prior to 1909 and after 1917 a supporter of Lenin, and also a prominent engineer and international industry administrator, head of the Moscow branch of Siemens. After Poland gained her independence, Jerzy Kaplinski (as again his son told me; I also heard something similar from one of the readers of my dissertation, the late Victor Terras, who knew Jerzy Kaplinski personally) fought on the Polish side in the Polish-Soviet War (1919–1921). In 1933 he started his work as a lecturer in Polish in Estonia, at the University of Tartu and soon learned Estonian well enough to deliver his lectures in this language<sup>19</sup>. In 1938 Jerzy Kalpinski married Estonian dancer and later translator from Polish and French Nora Raudsepp (1906–1982). By all accounts they were a very happy and quite exceptional couple. Victor Terras, who as a young man observed them in Tartu, told me many times in his inimitable Russian: "О, если бы вы знали, что это была за семья!" (Oh, I wish you knew them as a family!) On the second day of the German invasion of the Soviet Union Jerzy Kaplinski was arrested as an ethnically Polish person (Poland was already under German control) and in November 1943 he died in Vyatka Correctional Labor Camp (Vyatlag), most likely of starvation. In the 2000's Jaan Kaplinski learned that the Kaplinskis, who always considered themselves Polish patriots and, except for his father, intermarried with Polish nobility, actually descended from Jakob Cohen, one of the supporters and the brother-in-law of Jakob Frank (1726–1791), a Jewish religious leader who claimed to be a reincarnation of the self-proclaimed 'messiah' Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) and whose followers denied much difference between their interpretation of Judaism and Christianity (Cohen's sister Hannah was married to Frank). Jakob Cohen, Jaan Kaplinski's great great great great grandfather, most likely took his new last name Kapliński (a proper spelling of Kaplinski in Polish) from his godfather. Later, the Kaplińskis, like many other Polish Frankists, intermarried with *szlachta* (Polish landed nobility) and became fully Polonized. Jaan Kaplinski embraced this new information with much enthusiasm, for it added more color to his already colorful background.

As for his grandfather on his mother's side Jaan Raudsepp (1877–1961), he seemed to be an Estonian socialist. His daughter Nora (1906–1982), Jaan's mother, was born, while Jaan's grandfather was serving his prison sentence in Pskov (Kaplinskii 2022, p. 22). When in 2004 Kaplinski joined the Estonian Social Democratic Party, which was no longer a radical socialist party, but rather a moderate center-left organization, he could always claim that he was following in the footsteps of his own ancestors. His sympathies were always with the disadvantaged and the forgotten.

Early exposure to at least three languages—two closely related ones from the Finnish branch of the Finno-Ugric languages (the Võro language and literary Estonian) and one from the Slavic branch of Indo-European languages (Russian)—and probably his father's genes helped Kaplinski to become a true polyglot: before gradually switching to Russian he, already a classic author of Estonian literature, tried his hand at writing poetry in Finnish, English and the Võro languages. As if it was not enough, he himself trans-

lated from French (sometimes together with his mother), Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Chinese, and yes, English too.

Yet, according to Kaplinski's own testimony (Kaplinski 2014, pp. 7–8), his first poems were written in Russian under the influence of Mikhail Lermontov's great Romantic ballad *Air Ship* (*Воздушный корабль*, 1840), a free translation of a poem by Baron Joseph Christian von Zedlitz (1790–1862) about imaginary return of a dead emperor (Napoleon) to France, which no longer welcomed him. Finding his early Russian poems unsatisfactory, Kaplinski opted for literary Estonian (a language of education in Estonia since the early 1920's, not exactly very close to the Võro language) and eventually established himself as the most important voice in contemporary Estonian literature. In 1980 he initiated and signed *The Letter of 40 Intellectuals* against discrimination against the Estonian language, the gradual Russification of Estonia, and the recklessness of Soviet Estonian authorities in their dealings with youth protests. In the years 1990 to 1992 he was a member of *Eesti Kongress*, an alternative parliament, consisting of descendants of the citizens of the pre-1940 Estonian Republic and aiming at the country's complete political independence and continuity with the first Estonian state (1918–1940). From 1992 to 1995 he was a deputy of the Estonian State Assembly (*Riigikogu*), first representing the moderate Center Party, then as an independent. He gradually moved to the left and became a social democrat. By 2000 he started to write in Russian. According to Russian poet and literary historian Valery Shubinsky Kaplinski's first significant writing in Russian was a short story entitled "Real Numbers" (*Действительные числа*), composed at the Baltic Sea writers' retreat on the Swedish island of Gotland, where Shubinsky, a resident of St. Petersburg, was also present at the moment of writing (Shubinsky 2021)<sup>20</sup>. Poems in Russian followed. In the newly independent Estonia Russian lost its state-protected status, became a minority language, and was no longer an existential threat to Estonian. As such it started to be viewed by Kaplinski as a language of great poetry and his parents' secondary education, and thus a new and very interesting medium to explore. Kaplinski came to writing in Russian as a fully developed poet in a language other than Russian, although with articulated sympathy for some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian poets of great talent like Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841), Aleksandr Blok (1880–1921), Vladislav Khodasevich (Chodasiewicz in Polish, 1886–1939), himself like Kaplinski half-Polish and raised as a Roman Catholic, and Georgy Ivanov (1894–1958). This situation set him apart from the mainstream of the Russian tradition. Almost the entire body of work by Lermontov, Blok, Khodasevich, and Georgy Ivanov (not to be confused with another great twentieth-century Russian poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, no relation to Georgy) was written in rhymed accentual-syllabic verse. Although Kaplinski produced a few examples of fine rhymed accentual-syllabic poetry in Russian, his main strength was with unrhymed meditative poetry in mixed feet with the obligatory caesura (metrical pause) in the middle of each line, something that was closer to the syntax of colloquial Russian, which Kaplinski sensed so well.

Yet, his first Russian collection *White Butterflies of the Night* (*Белые бабочки ночи*, Tallinn, 2014) opened with a beautiful accentual-syllabic rhymed poem, a gesture of reverence to more than two centuries of Russian accentual-syllabic poetry. Its final stanza reads in word-for-word translation:

There are faces reflected in the watery mirror—  
I don't know who is me—  
the white butterfly has a dream  
that it is a poet a philosopher  
(Kaplinski 2014, p. 5)

This idea that "life is a dream" —*la vida es sueño*,—if we are to quote a title of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's famous play of 1636 in which the action takes place in a purely imaginary Poland and (probably) Russia, the countries not entirely alien to Kaplinski—is one of the key motifs of Kaplinski's Russian poetry. The final stanza of another, unpublished accentual-syllabic rhymed poem, a variation on a famous poem by Georgy Ivanov

(Kaplinski composed it in June 2020, when he knew that he was dying), treats death as the “awakening” from a transitory dream of life to fuller existence and a better dream of afterlife, thus forming an arch with the opening poem of *White Butterflies of the Night*. It reads in word-for-word translation:

The book, a story of myself, is about to end—  
a story written by somebody else’s hand.  
Will I wake up in my own or somebody else’s dream  
beyond other rivers, in an alien land?<sup>21</sup>

An even more important gesture was Kaplinski’s choice of pre-1918 Russian orthography for the poems, the author’s preface, and the afterword to *White Butterflies of the Night* written by none other than Sergey Zavyalov (himself a great advocate of the traditional Russian orthography). In his first Russian collection Kaplinski aimed at a direct continuity with the tradition of the early medieval monks Sts. Cyril and Methodius, the first translators of the Bible into Old Church Slavonic which eventually affected Kaplinski’s worldview. It was easy to write in Estonian and be a pagan (Estonia was and remains for the most part a nominally Lutheran country, with articulate Eastern Orthodox and Catholic minorities), as Kaplinski considered himself for the most part of his life, to pray to the elements and nature. Yet, Russian language and literature were literally permeated with the references to the Bible and Christianity and have always retained a very inspired dialog with both. Rainer Maria Rilke’s statement that, “while other countries border on mountains, oceans and rivers, Russia borders on God,”<sup>22</sup> referred to this engagement of the Russian language and culture with the Bible. Like Kaplinski, the young Rilke also wrote a few Russian poems (he spent some time in Russia, where he met with Count Leo Tolstoy and a very young Boris Pasternak), yet his best poetry was of course written much later and in his native German. As for Kaplinski, his gradual switch to Russian meant a reevaluation of his own relationship with monotheism and the Catholic faith of his Polish ancestors. During our meeting in 2015 Kaplinski confided to me that he considered himself a “Catholic with doubts” (сомневающийся католик), yet doubts, as we know, are a normal part of any faith. The opening lines of the very first poem in the main part of *White Butterflies of the Night*—after the introductory poem and author’s preface—are a commentary on the initial and final words of the Nicene Creed:

I can only pray to God  
who resurrects everybody extinct  
not me  
(Kaplinskii 2014, p. 13)

All that Kaplinski’s lyrical persona could hope for at this point was an “alternative reality/where I would be able to print my books using letters Ъ and Ѡ/and read—under my own government—Blok and Khodasevich/together with my father,” as Kaplinski said in a concluding poem from his first Russian collection (Kaplinskii 2014, p. 83), an elegiac, very touching, sober, and sad meditation on time, history, and personal fate. The reason for that was too obvious: it was the poet’s complete break with the contemporary state of things and the growing need to deal with the things that would (hopefully) endure: “yes, I was born here/yet I am originally not from this place I was neither made under the Soviets/nor in Estonia” (Ibid.) An epigraph, quoting from a sarcastic poem of Kaplinski’s favorite Georgy Ivanov—about the imminent return of the pre-revolutionary Russian orthography (“Ъ will rise from the dead, Ъ and Ѡ will come back too”) which, as we know, never occurred—adds even more sobriety to Kaplinski’s own piece. At the end of his afterword Sergey Zavyalov asked one, yet the most important question: “[I]s contemporary Russian poetry strong enough to sustain [the presence of] this book?” (Kaplinskii 2014, p. 91) To everybody’s surprise *White Butterflies of the Night* was greeted with much enthusiasm in Russian literary circles, Kaplinski received two prestigious awards (the Russian Prize in 2015<sup>23</sup> and the Andrei Bely Prize in 2018<sup>24</sup>), and three more collections of original Russian

poems followed (Kaplinskii 2017, 2018, 2021). Unfortunately, due to his publishers' requests he had to abandon pre-1918 orthography, which suited his poetry so well. In 2017 Kaplinski was diagnosed with an incurable condition (progressive bulbar palsy), which gradually led to his inability to speak (everyone who ever had a chance to talk with Jaan remembered what an inspired conversationalist he was). However, he continued to compose poetry in Russian, which only improved in its depth and quality—a remarkable late blossoming for an author, who, as he himself joked, became a very young poet again at the age of 75. In 2016 Kaplinski was nominated for the Nobel Prize in the literature (again), yet, given the fact that poetry from Estonia occupied a very humble place in the minds of those who judged the nominees, the poet's chances (despite his spectacular achievements) were slim. The prize that year went to Bob Dylan, who did not even acknowledge the award.

Kaplinski's last Russian poetry collection *Winged Fingerprint* (*Отпечаток крылатого пальца*), composed during and after 2017, when he knew that he was dying, is his best one. The collection's enigmatic title is explained in its penultimate poem: this "winged fingerprint" is God's imprint on His creation and on

... my life,  
which also, as it often seems to me,  
bears a winged fingerprint of God,  
with Whom I was fighting, for Whom I was longing  
almost from my childhood.  
(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 79)

This is a clear reference to Jacob's dream (in Kaplinski's view, *la vida es sueño* anyway) in which he encountered and fought with God, Who in turn changed Jacob's name to Israel (Genesis 32: 24–30). The majority of the poems in *Winged Fingerprint* are meditations on history, personal life, human creativity (man is a symbolic animal, according to Ernst Cassirer), death, immortality, faith, and yes, God. Kaplinski reveals himself as a wise poet-philosopher, who is ready to share his final thoughts on those subjects with his future readers (he knew that the book would be published most likely after his death). There is no collection of poems like that in the entire history of Russian poetry.

As stated in the preface to *Winged Fingerprint*: "With this [...] book Russian poetry, a rather new phenomenon in comparison with the poetries of Europe, especially Italian poetry (which traces its genealogy to Ancient Rome), and even the poetries of England and Germany, has finally achieved its clear maturity" (Kaplinskii 2022, p. 5).

In a key poem from the collection, composed during his stay on Madeira, an island in Atlantic Ocean halfway from Europe to North America ("an island, which I reached only once in my life,/yet was longing for it all my life," as he wrote in a penultimate poem of *Winged Fingerprint*), Kaplinski speaks of the happiest, and most desperate for those who have no faith, state of mind and heart, when the simplest things observed, like an armchair abandoned on the beach, symbolically reveal the fuller reality beyond them:

Old armchair lays on the beach  
and is half-buried in sand.  
It is not only me who is alone like this armchair, like everybody  
within the circular confines of the horizon.  
Only God is not here or there and not alone.  
He simply is and persists to be God  
here and there, behind 0 and ∞,  
far away from His name and from everybody, who believes  
or does not believe in Him.  
(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 31)

This is a state of things which allows Kaplinski's lyrical persona, like those who are on the very top of Dante's purgatory (Dante, Beatrice), to reach the location, where

[n]o human speech is heard, the wind



subsides, allowing us to hear  
 something else, something reminding us  
 of a light sound of flames or birds flying  
 and allowing us to stop for a moment, since this ladder  
 is no longer a ladder but a tree with a top  
 almost reaching the clouds, the sky ...  
 (Kaplinski 2022, p. 59)

—a clear reference to Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28: 10–17) and the spiritual ladder of Plato and the Platonic philosophers, and also (possibly) to a topography of Dante’s purgatory (one should keep in mind that Dante is the most important epic poet of the Christian tradition), which is a conic structure (a mountain) with the trees of earthly paradise (*paradiso terrestre*) on top, while sky and open space are the realm of paradise.

Kaplinski died on 8 August 2021 as a Christian, and his funeral service, attended by family members, friends, and political dignitaries, was held in the Catholic cathedral of his native Tartu (Roman Catholicism, like Eastern Orthodoxy, is a minority denomination in Estonia). In a few Russian poems from *Winged Fingerprint* he imagined himself flying posthumously as a swift over everything he loved, a motif which appeared also in the penultimate poem of the collection: “... God’s fingerprint on a wave, which reached the shore,/a print of the swift’s wing on a white little cloud ...”). One of his last wishes was that instead of financially contributing towards the funeral his friends and admirers would contribute to the Estonian Ornithological Society, also known as “Birdlife Estonia.”

## 5. Dialog Worth Listening to Very Carefully

What is the place of this dialog between contemporary poetry composed in Russian and the Bible in the international and historical contexts? Sergey Zavyalov mentions as possible participants in that dialog “the great poetry of the English language (Donne and Milton, T. S. Eliot and Auden), great French poetry (Péguy, Claudel), Byzantine poetry, which never entered the world literary canon, and individual [outstanding] names like Gregory of Narek, Yehuda Halevi, Grigory Skovoroda, Taras Shevchenko, Odysseas Elytis” (Zavyalov 2022). Natalia Chernykh prefers a broader, less specific, and more inclusive view: “The Bible provides us with a very good sense of sacred space. And sacred action. Poetry, in its essence, is also an action, and we know that” (Chernykh 2022). And Jaan Kaplinski pleads for the restoration and remembrance of anything unjustly forgotten.

In the end, Zavyalov reaffirms the absolute necessity of faith inside the world fractured either by war with its side effects of hunger, the destroyed infrastructure of urban life, and so on (*Advent: Leningrad, 1941*), or by our own wrong understanding of the purpose of our existence (*I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ*). Chernykh’s poetry deals with the problem of the relevance of the Bible as a lens through which the world can be seen and interpreted by a practicing Christian. And Kaplinski’s Russian poetry of the last two decades of his life can be described as a dialog with the Biblical God and death ‘after the end of everything’ as well as a spirited prayer for the salvation of everything deemed ‘insignificant’ (including, yet not limited to, extinct species, languages, and cultures), everything left out of the secular triumphalist narrative of ‘larger history.’

Unyielding faith in absolute truth and the ability to see your life’s ultimate purpose, the relevance of the Bible as a lens aimed at the world around us, an attractive vision of the future (in, other words, of a world to come after us), which will not discard anybody or anything as ‘insignificant’—a vision born out of much struggle and doubt; this is, in sum, one way to characterize the contribution of Zavyalov, Chernykh, and Kaplinski to the ongoing engagement with the Bible in other parts of the world, and it should be treated with all due seriousness.

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## Appendix A. Sergey Zavyalov (b. 1958), I Saw Jesus: And He Was Christ (2022)

### I. Transfiguration of Jesus

**And after six days Jesus taketh *with him* Peter, and James, and John,  
and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves:  
and he was transfigured before them.**

**And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow;  
so as no fuller on earth can white them.**

#### *Mark 9: 2–3*

It appears before my eyes            this sunset  
surrounded            by the gradually darkening air  
and in the direction            of mountains  
everything            lifts up slowly in a pink halo  
of the setting sun            and becomes  
clearer and clearer

*It is said:  
the gate is open in heaven  
there will be no time  
everything old passed away*

*And yes, the hero is ready to die  
for his kin  
for his land  
for his language*

As if the mountains            with their not fully melted snow  
from the other world            as if they were not  
flying            but lifting up slowly            skywards  
where neither us            nor our evil deeds  
and lofty yearnings            exist  
in the fourth day of Creation

*And yes, the priest is ready to die  
for the Word of God  
for His testament  
for the fulfillment of God's Law*

*Plowman  
shepherd  
craftsman  
are also ready to die for something*

I remember this well            I was not yet twenty  
it appears before my eyes            after not so brief  
a life            which started back then afresh  
I suddenly felt            somebody was behind me  
I turned my head            his garments were shining  
as if a cloud descending upon us



Everybody avoided me  
 saying "God's punishment"  
 and I started to think 'twas my fault  
 my own poking around<sup>26</sup>

*You may even feel  
 exalted  
 living again and again  
 through the sweet memories  
 of your girlhood  
 Were they l o v e or not?*

So when did I become possessed?  
 Still a girl While others walked with their eyes cast down  
 I looked eye to eye  
 smiling happily!

*And yes, you may be revisited  
 by delusive hopes of your youth  
 What else could they be if not l o v e?*

Asked myself  
 Why should a girl wait?  
 Am I worse than those lads?  
 Let them wait!

*You may also keep deeply inside  
 the disillusionments  
 of your adulthood  
 L o v e never errs*

And it started my life appeared to be a feast  
 I allowed all ways and not just for money  
 it was fun so much fun! I remember it now  
 Lord what an old fool I am

*Now about l o v e:  
 does it create or destroy?  
 does it give life or take it away?*

Even then  
 when I saw him among the crowd and some feeling inside me woke up  
 let me I thought press against him in passing  
 as it happened before with others

*Only l o v e knows you better  
 it testifies in your favor like no one else  
 and now it dies with you*

And then in my belly something turned over  
 the pain concentrated as if during a period  
 and I experienced such dryness (complete)  
 I was afraid I was about to pass out

And he turned his head and he spoke  
 "I feel the release of my power"<sup>27</sup>  
 then I fell and he added "Daughter be brave"<sup>28</sup>  
 and moved further

Since that moment I started attending the temple carrying my veil with  
me  
when I spread it out it seemed I could see his face  
and it occurred to me recently back then I saw Jesus  
and He was Christ!

**We venerate Your most pure image, O Good One,  
and ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ God.  
Of Your own will You were pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh  
to deliver Your creatures from bondage to the enemy.  
Therefore, with thanksgiving we cry aloud to You:  
You have filled all with joy, O our Savior, by coming to save the world.**

*Troparion, Tone 2*

### III. The Rich Young Man

And when he was gone forth into the way,  
there came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master,  
what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?  
Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him,  
One thing thou lackest: go thy way,  
sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor.  
And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved.

*Mark 10: 17, 21–22*

Am I truly a rich young man?  
Am I truly eating the very last crumbs from my family's table?  
My grandfather owned a mansion  
and a villa up in the mountains also a textile factory  
which he jokingly called ergasterion<sup>29</sup>

*Are you ready to die  
because everything will be covered by  
or evaporate  
with the water?*

Then we had to sell the factory.  
And my father got rid of a villa.  
I was eight. I cried and cried.  
Now two thirds of a mansion I rent to immigrants.  
It barely covers my bills.

*Are you ready to die  
because your air will be poisoned  
and dissolved  
in the highest?*

I can't even play my instrument  
or listen to music without my headphones  
They complain with no respect: little kids, I disturb them  
What they listen to are not Turkish maqams or music by Kantemiroglu<sup>30</sup>  
but indecent sounds

*Are you ready to die  
because the sun is cooling down  
or, quite the opposite,  
heating up speedily?*

Should I give up everything I possess?            I possess almost nothing  
 My library            my favorite poems  
 books in exotic languages            passed to me by my dear unforgettable father  
 CDs with classical music            DVDs with silent films  
 Who will care for those items?

*Are you ready to die  
 because the plague will exterminate  
 all the people  
 and all living creatures?*

What he said            I can't remember exactly  
 but the meaning was            "woe unto you that are rich  
 for ye will be poor            woe unto you that are respectable  
 for ye will be ruined            woe unto you that are joyous  
 for ye will lament and weep"<sup>31</sup>

*No, you are not ready to die  
 hit by the elements  
 shot in a battle  
 knifed in a village brawl*

Oh how true were his words  
 I deserve better health            I am under forty  
 yet I suffer from high blood pressure            cardiac arrhythmia            and  
 sleepless nights  
 I deserve so much to be like the others            "not my will, but Thine  
 to be done"<sup>32</sup>

And he didn't accept me:            didn't care for toy camel<sup>33</sup>  
 for my privileged youth            with its Sunday liturgies  
 which I always attended            nicely dressed  
 I am utterly lost            yet I almost believed            (still believe)  
 back then I saw Jesus: and He was Christ

**From the years of my youth,  
 many passions combat me;  
 but You, Who are my Savior,  
 assist me and save me.**

**You, haters of Zion,  
 shall be put to shame by the Lord Almighty,  
 for as grass in the fire  
 you shall all be withered.**

**By the Holy Spirit,  
 every soul is made living,  
 is exalted, and made shining through purification,  
 by the Threefold oneness, in a hidden manner.**

*Anavathmoi (Hymns of Ascent), Tone 4*

#### IV. The Good Samaritan

**And Jesus answering said,  
 A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho,  
 and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment,**

**and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.  
But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was:  
and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,  
and went to him, and bound up his wounds,  
pouring in oil and wine.**

*Luke 10: 30, 33–34*

I was driving you know back home in a truck and the blinding Sun was  
setting  
it was time like to stop have my evening prayer (*shom*  
*namozi*<sup>34</sup> we call it)  
so I parked went to the bushes  
washed myself from a flask took a mat (*zhoynamoz, namozlyk*<sup>35</sup>) for  
my prayer  
thought like: what was the right direction? then spread a mat

*The day will come  
and the faithful will stand against faithful*

Then I heard like someone was moaning  
*Asfagfurriloh* (Let Allah forgive me) I thought: machinations of Shaitan  
I kept my position continued and reached  
“I seek Allah’s help from Satan, who is being stoned”  
and then the moaning increased

*And poor  
will cut each other’s heads off with sabers  
and cut each other’s bellies open with knives  
and crush the heads of each other’s children  
against the sharp edges of stone buildings*

The prayer was interrupted I thought:  
“Let me die of Allah’s rage  
Let him burn me out with fire”<sup>36</sup>  
I had to finally go and see  
“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”

*And all of them will pray  
five times a day  
and read their prayers  
in the same language*

I went into a ditch and saw a human being you know  
all covered with blood couldn’t speak just moaned  
I thought I still had a chance to take him to a hospital  
Since Allah did not let him die before  
he should live!  
“No one can ever die  
without Allah’s permission”<sup>37</sup>

*The day will come  
and infidels will stand against infidels*

So I carried him out and you know  
have covered the seat not to pay too much for damage to the truck’s  
owner





**And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed:  
and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy;  
Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.  
Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.**

*Matthew 9: 2, 6*

Suddenly I wanted to bear a son  
stopped smoking  
and why should I care for those chats after my shifts  
if I was expecting a c h i l d?

Was so happy  
I walked and he was inside my belly  
nothing was visible  
yet I walked!

I thought (what a fool!)  
I would teach him music  
English language  
would purchase a piano!

*They will come and say:  
woman God didn't create  
Adam and his rib  
y o u should be what you want*

Then my mind was blurred  
medicine people some quacks  
medicine people some doctors again  
I have spent all my money

*They will also come and say  
woman is not a wife  
and woman is not a mother  
woman is what s h e h e r s e l f wants to be*

My baby couldn't  
walk and speak  
and hold his head  
he couldn't even be breastfed

His father would come  
from time to time  
bring and say something  
I understood nothing

*They will also come and say  
Children are not from God  
He doesn't provide them with f a t h e r a n d m o t h e r  
It is y o u who provide them with who you want*

And when did it change?  
When did I wake up and ceased expecting a miracle  
every day ceased fighting for every step  
every sound every gulp?

*They will also come and say  
Your flesh is not from God either  
In whose image a woman was created?  
Y o u will do to your flesh what you fancy*

It is almost thirty years now  
and I know  
everything from now on will be better and better  
every year every month every day  
since His hand has once  
touched my boy  
Not for a moment I doubt  
I saw Jesus: and He was Christ!

**As of old Thou didst raise up the paralytic,  
O Lord God, by Thy God-like care and might, raise up my soul,  
which is palsied by diverse sins and transgressions  
and by unseemly deeds and acts,  
that, saved I may also cry out:  
O Compassionate Redeemer, O Christ God,  
glory to Thy dominion and might!**

*Kontakion, Tone 3*

## VI. Christ Carrying the Cross

**And as they led him away,  
they laid hold upon one Simon, a Cyrenian, coming out of the country,  
and on him they laid the cross,  
that he might bear it after Jesus.**

*Luke 23: 26*

I was back from the village and tractor repair shop  
yet sober (we had to start sowing next morning)  
tractor's engine was malfunctioning after messing a lot with it I got it  
fixed  
then they came

"Paro čokšné! (Good evening!)"<sup>43</sup> I said  
thought they were from our district  
and they talked back "Well! Want the same?  
An accomplice?"

And I saw the guy who was with them  
all covered with blood he could not even speak  
As if it wasn't enough they forced him to drag  
some frighteningly huge wooden thing

*You are telling yourself  
that you aren't ready to die  
yet you can imagine your death  
which is i n e v i t a b l e*

I was not looking for trouble  
My silly woman was waiting for me at home  
and also old folks  
and two boys

one named Santya<sup>44</sup>, like her, a slob  
 the other Romashka<sup>45</sup> no doubt like me  
 he won't let himself be offended  
 he would beat the hell out of the offender

What should I do?  
 I gave my shoulder the wooden thing was so heavy  
 can one person drag it?  
 he sighed as if starting to breath

*Are you ready for the death of  
 not just e v e r y b o d y beloved  
 not just e v e r y t h i n g beloved  
 but simply e v e r y t h i n g?*

And this guy he didn't remind me of some other person  
 looked like a human and yet not necessarily human  
 as if from the sky  
 and all covered with shining

And those dogs they tortured him almost to death  
 He started lapsing into you know our tongue  
 "Pazom, Pazom, mejś Moń kadymek?"<sup>46</sup>  
 Why hast thou forsaken me?"<sup>47</sup>

Well I thought they were about to kill him  
 and the fat one turned to me and said all of a sudden  
 "Azö feste padas! (Get the fuck out of here!)"<sup>48</sup>  
 I took his direction

Ran could not understand a thing  
 only heard  
 the sound of a sledgehammer behind me  
 then silence

*Are you ready  
 for not a single witness or testimony  
 of w h a t h a d e x i s t e d  
 b e f o r e?*

I could not recollect what happened for many years  
 When I got really old it occurred to me  
 back then I saw Jesus:  
 and He was Christ!

**O Lord, save Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance!  
 Grant victory to the Orthodox Christians over their adversaries,  
 and by virtue of Thy cross, preserve Thy habitation.**

*Troparion to the True and Life-Giving Cross*

## Appendix B. Natalia Chernykh (b. 1969), Three Poems (2014)

### I. Joseph is Dreaming

Neither a piercing sound. Nor a brightness added by some clever creator to their faces.  
 Yes, it is better to increase the sound and hit the balloons, so that they take off.  
 His dreams<sup>49</sup> before dawn were laying next to each other, warming each other, and bleating. Dreams— who were they?

*Don't get in love with them, don't trust your herd, don't pay attention to the oracles!*

By saying, he explained: male or female raven

*(young princess in March with a joyous eye  
hovering over her favorite puddle; those puddles turn into oceans in our dreams,  
and our destinies are like puddles under the sun).*

You live your dreams fast like you live your life,  
like you burn some ancient forgotten script onto a blank DVD or CD.

You have to expect at least one ear of wheat. Follow this rootless infinitive  
and expect it while seating in your frozen ditch at dawn.  
Neither a voice. Nor rivers of fire, condemnations, and day-spring. No.  
Expect an ear of wheat until it appears<sup>50</sup>.

Open pain, they said, was more visible than pain, which was asleep. Yet the  
true problem was dreams.

Dreams like water in a nearby river: they raised up with melting snow,  
and brought new movements, sounds, meanings. And hues. And  
combinations of strange figures.

Then the shadow appeared split into thin stripes, and, with all those stripes  
combined,  
presented itself, and turned all visible, tangible, and taken inside,  
including cold and warmth, into its opposite.

... the cold metal-blue sky over your head lacked any answer.  
Horrible torture filled your entire being;  
while devouring desirable beauty, you rolled down your bed:

your fall-over was so obvious, so frightening (yet there was none), full of  
approach and attraction,  
your hands were in the hands of a female, both pairs melting, then, while dust  
was mixing with dust,  
some musical instrument shrieked in your neighbor's place (somebody added  
a rhythm to its shrieking),

and March evening revealed itself like a one-eyed soldier over the  
neighborhood.

You enjoyed it and arrived in spasms of horror, in shrieks of released  
inability ...

like mutilated branches, while baring their animal teeth, come together again,  
like ice crunches under your feet, like lovers fall of the roof ...

No, not like that. And what about the moon? The moon was shining clearly  
and silently, the traders were passing by.

Several painful years passed by like cows: a skinny one, then a well-fed one<sup>51</sup>.

Only dreams were alive. Although it was not recommended to believe them.  
Did you try? Did everything go well? Who?

A reader? Or the one whose name was sweeter than those dreams?

The dreams are like bread. Any dream is like bread. It can't be voided.

The grapes wept over the chalice of Benjamin.

Dream was fortified, blessed, and royal. Reality was closer to the grave.  
As for space – it could be heavier or lighter. The space, which spirit explored  
for food

(we had enough interpretations; it was true that they were untrue)—  
the desired food was like paradise, which had already become food.

... in a thirst for feeding paradise

fire wakes up and carries horrible dreams.  
Yet all dreams are horrible.

Wait, my precious, wasn't it a hug of death, which looked like a married  
woman?<sup>52</sup>

Wasn't this approach caused by a smell of your dream around your tender  
neck?

Why make things complicated? Raven, bread, grapes, and a woman  
are followed by a prison and your father.

As if they are not. Yet, when you look, they are.

And 'yes' and 'no' (like one creature?) have one heart and two bodies,  
yet they pass. But the voice is certainly present. The sound is your firstborn. It  
is your voice.

## II. Night in Ramah

Two voices, one silence:  
voices pierce, silence oppresses,  
flashes of voices and a shadow of silence wander around.

Rachel cries out to the Holy Virgin, who stands at the Holy Cross<sup>53</sup>.

*My mistress gracious Mary,  
when I gave birth to my firstborn and to four more boys,  
the heart of my beloved turned away, and I remained silent ...*

*... it felt as if I was dying  
like branches at God's feet, like feet, which he kissed, in the dust ...*

*... and I couldn't get rid of my torture.*

As if no one can see the Virgin in the shadow of the Cross.

... all those stars of Ramah are yours, Rachel.

Rachel cries out to the Holy Virgin, who stands at the Holy Cross,  
her voice festers inside me, one can't cut it from memory.

*My mistress gracious Mary,  
you know that a son, moreover not your own, inflicts the greatest pain:  
his voice is like a razor blade, his fever is like his favorite game,  
yet I have asked the One, who art, to give me a son,  
and here I am with you, from the moment you gave birth in a manger with sheep  
around,  
my lament has scattered the stones of the city of Ramah.*

As if no one can see the Virgin in the shadow of the Cross.

O my ancient mother,  
transparent and weightless, my mother, who seems to be absent.

Rachel cries out to the Holy Virgin, who stands at the Holy Cross:  
stars come out of a throat of a dawn.

My mistress gracious Mary,  
aren't we all hit by St. Anthony's fire?<sup>54</sup>  
You try to stand up—your legs are pierced,  
you try to sit—your shoulders are pierced.

As if no one can see the Virgin in the shadow of the Cross,  
and her silence rolls into a scroll:

“Look, the only thing left after us is a board in a refectory  
which is enough.  
Remember the thing which happened to us on earth—  
the Nativity of your son and of Mine”.

### III. Diocletian's Gold<sup>55</sup>

. . . some steps in the streets and around our corner too:  
sun-tanned neighbors exit all doors  
(as if the figures cut out of amber made by an experienced master)  
to chat in their southern dialect.  
Like Diocletian.

Celestial body rests in the body of honey and dryness.  
We hear Caesar's steps: the sword of gods moves towards the hero,  
who is invisible behind the smoke from an altar.  
Like Caesar at dawn and a very long back of his head.

Jupiter, please visit our floors and give us our bread and movies.  
Yet this Jupiter is a warrior; his strict mouth shines like the flames on an altar.

Great Alexander, be humbled. Your spacious lion-like beauty  
doesn't fit the Roman cosmos. And my Caesar is cut out of an Old World  
sycamore tree  
and protects the sounds of Etruscan mysteries and the blood of my brethren,  
also the granites covering the public square which make my feet tired,  
and much-desired rest on a paid-for bed,  
and some groceries from the nearby quarter  
(with a discount for sunflower oil).

Jupiter is a relative of mine. And of my street.  
And of all rude wagons moving there. And of everybody in those wagons.

And of everybody in this world who, in the absence of fate,  
stop and freeze for a moment.

Moment, time, eternity. And Diocletian.  
Like a sword kept in its scabbard, not yet a smell of blood,  
but a cry of Sybil, or some sick girl  
in the inner space (compressed by many breaths)  
of a suburban temple.

And the shadows of the Moirai are spiked by three rays.  
Caesar enters the stage. He is almost invisible through the magnificent crowd  
around him.  
One can only see the long tanned back of his head.

### Appendix C. Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021), Ten Poems

From WHITE BUTTERFLIES OF THE NIGHT (2014)

I can only pray to God  
 who resurrects everybody extinct<sup>56</sup>  
 not me  
 I will stay aside  
 together with yesteryear's snow  
 and blossoming apple-trees of this spring  
 and the morning wind will deliver  
 my poems prayers and mantras  
 to all parts of the world  
 highways paths and mailboxes

(Kaplinskii 2014, p. 13)

*Ђ will rise from the dead, Ђ and Θ will come back too.*  
*Georgy Ivanovs<sup>57</sup>*

The past departs and the future moves faster and faster  
 through fingers days and concerns—like shadows on the grass  
 which become longer and darker—and the time is close  
 when I have to tell my final words  
 to one of those shadows—this is not difficult  
 yet I am not sure if I will be understood—yes, I was born here  
 yet I am originally not from this place I was neither made under the Soviets  
 nor in Estonia—I just got into a wrong spot, a subject  
 of a Sovereign with sad eyes who was killed almost a century ago  
 far away from here—when I close my eyes  
 I hear something like a weeping crying for help  
 shelling slogans songs prayers and spells  
 through the noise of a whirlpool of history which carries us away  
 together with fragments of our and somebody else's memories  
 to the realm of shadows or alternative reality  
 where I would be able to print my books using letters Ђ and Θ  
 and read—under my own government—Blok and Khodasevich  
 together with my father and listen to him telling me that one day  
 his family was visited by Mr. Vladimir Ulyanov<sup>58</sup>  
 a person distinguished by good manners—he brought a pound of candies  
 for a boy who thirty years later would die in a prison camp  
 like the majority of friends and comrades of Mr. Ulyanov

(Kaplinskii 2014, p. 83)

From WINGED FINGERPRINT (2022)

If you have nothing to say, you may simply say “good by,”  
 “until I see you again,” “until tomorrow” or simply “farewell,”  
 say a few words, which sometime will gain significance,  
 then switch the light off, send your male cat to the kitchen, and go to bed  
 with a detective story, written by Chizh or Verbinina, and for just an hour  
 find yourself in a time, where your grandfathers and grandmothers  
 were young, happy, and successful, some in St. Petersburg,  
 some in Dorpat<sup>59</sup>, and all horrors of the twentieth century  
 were far away from their imagination.

The time went slowly, and the future didn't exist:  
 a boy, who was destined to become my father,  
 drank milk bought from a Finnish milkwoman<sup>60</sup> and was taken for walks  
 to the Summer Garden<sup>61</sup>, and a head of prison in Pskov<sup>62</sup>  
 where my Estonian grandfather served his half-year sentence  
 for his anti-government activities — congratulated him on a birth of his  
 daughter,  
 who was destined to become my mother and live as a widow  
 for forty years with her memories of war<sup>63</sup> and bohemian youth in Paris,  
 which I visited for the first time when she was no longer alive.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 22)

Moonlight drips from the roofs of the buildings on asphalt,  
 speed bumps, roofs of the sleepy cars.  
 Motorcycle roar dissolves into silence.  
 Two white ships disappear into Ocean<sup>64</sup>.  
 Old armchair lays on the beach  
 and is half-buried in sand.  
 It is not only me who is alone like this armchair, like everybody  
 within the circular confines of the horizon.  
 Only God is not here or there and not alone.  
 He simply is and persists to be God  
 here and there, behind 0 and ∞,  
 far away from His name and from everybody, who believes  
 or does not believe in Him. Here and now  
 He simply plays hide and seek  
 with waves and little nimble crabs on wet sand  
 and leaves His fingerprints on sand and water.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 31)

He stands in his worn old pants  
 and colorless shirt at the gate of the department store —  
 Jesus Christ, with a whip in the bosom, and Santa Claus  
 stands inside the store, next to a Christmas tree from dawn to dusk,  
 from dusk to dawn he nods his head.  
 Next to him is a deer made of electric bulbs.  
 A Christmas carol comes from a public restroom.  
 Jesus is waiting: his birthday is a month and a half away.  
 He is waiting and thinking: *Should I be born? Should I be born again  
 and whip those sellers and their customers out of here<sup>65</sup>  
 or just silently disappear and leave  
 this marketplace and this world to them (to us)?*

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 35)

I don't know if I want to die for something  
 like the Motherland, freedom, Europe, Asia,  
 America, Australia, Africa, or Antarctica,  
 the triumph of communism, peace in the whole world,  
 self-determination of nations<sup>66</sup>,  
 true faith, true czar<sup>67</sup>.  
 Now I understand: I want to simply die  
 like my predecessors and ancestors  
 in the time of Venus of Willendorf<sup>68</sup>,



Adam and Eve, Moses and Aaron,  
 like all those small creatures in the ancient sea  
 whose shells sunk to the very bottom  
 and became limestone, occasionally marble—  
 a material for tombstones and monuments  
 for some of us:  
 they are gradually getting covered  
 with moss and lichen and become  
 a momentous resting place for hover flies and bumblebees  
 and keep for a while a glow of the setting sun.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 45)

I ascend a black and white ladder<sup>69</sup>.  
 Somebody, who looks like a dark panther<sup>70</sup>, moves ahead of me,  
 although, upon reaching the thirty second step<sup>71</sup>,  
 this person is no longer this person but probably Haydn or Beethoven.  
 No human speech is heard, the wind  
 subsides, allowing us to hear  
 something else, something reminding us  
 of a light sound of flames or birds flying  
 and allowing us to stop for a moment, since this ladder  
 is no longer a ladder but a tree with a top  
 almost reaching the clouds, the sky<sup>72</sup>  
 and the top's color will turn from green to the darkest blue,  
 like a sky, revealing one by one  
 its early stars: Arcturus, Vega, do, re, mi, fa, sol—  
 and our longings and dreams will mingle in our hearts  
 with a faith in inaudible music of the spheres.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 59)

Looking at a little spotted butterfly,  
 which holds for the entire day to a windowpane  
 as if some finely designed badge glued to it,  
 I want to believe that it has a name,  
 a name, which reminds us of something long forgotten  
 like a message from the forest of symbols, *forêt des symboles*,  
 where we are often lost, while trying to translate  
 the flight of the small insects and the specks of dust,  
 the voices of creeks and aspen leaves, kingfishers and orioles,  
 the silence of moss covering stones under the pine-trees on a hill  
 and high spindrift clouds, which promise us  
 an excellent sunny day tomorrow—into our human language.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 61)

They probably wait for me there, on the other side;  
 I don't know for sure, yet I dream that the birds,  
 who died crushing against our windowpanes,  
 being caught by the nets of the bird-catchers and paws of male cats,  
 are alive over there,  
 forests are preserved which we have already destroyed,  
 also my broken and lost toys and my books are preserved,  
 old manuscripts, extinct languages  
 (Pictish, Siculan, Cretan, Etruscan),

the art of telling one's future according to bird's flight,  
 animal entrails, thunder and thunderbolts,  
 telling the future that has already become present  
 and is simply ourselves, our lives, our time,  
 our houses, gardens and flights of the swifts  
 over the old Kremlin<sup>73</sup>, over bees and bumblebees  
 in the thickets of white lamium in a small park next to the river.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 74)

Indelible prints of an invisible finger  
 on a fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel,  
 on a last pale leaf falling from a linden-tree,  
 on the last page of a little old notebook  
 resting in a dusty drawer of a writing desk,  
 God's fingerprint on a wave, which reached the shore,  
 a print of the swift's wing on a white little cloud—  
 this wingprint spends a night in the Southeast  
 over an island, which I reached only once in my life,  
 yet was longing for it all my life,  
 which also, as it often seems to me,  
 bears a winged fingerprint of God,  
 with Whom I was fighting<sup>74</sup>, for Whom I was longing  
 almost from my childhood.

(Kaplinskii 2022, p. 79)

*Translated from the Russian by Igor Vishnevetsky*

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mostly thanks to an influential essay by the eighteenth-century Russian poet and scholar Mikhailo Lomonosov Introduction to the Benefits of Church Books for the Russian Language (Предисловие о пользе книг церковных в российском языке) (Lomonosov 1950–1983, vol. 7, pp. 585–92).
- <sup>2</sup> Another contemporary Russian poet Valery Shubinsky (b. 1965), mentioned later in this essay, also spent part of his childhood in the former Tsarskoye Selo, where his father, an artillery officer, was stationed.
- <sup>3</sup> During the so-called Great Purge of 1936–1938.
- <sup>4</sup> Mordva is an ethnic group living mostly in the Volga region and speaking two closely related languages of the Finno-Ugric family, Erzya and Moksha: a situation to a degree paralleled by the existence of the Northern and Southern Estonian language; see more on that subject in relation to Jaan Kaplinski.
- <sup>5</sup> For a deeper analysis of Zavyalov's poetry of the early and middle periods, composed prior to his most interesting work of the present "synthetic" period, see (Orlitskii 2021, pp. 918–36).
- <sup>6</sup> <https://zaryadyehall.com/afisha/novim/sergey-akhunov-rozhdestvenskiy-post-orkestr-musica-viva-dirizhyer-valentin-uryupin/> (accessed on 28 October 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> He left Russia in 2004.
- <sup>8</sup> The dark irony is that Zavyalov and his family, themselves Russian émigrés, rent an apartment made of one quarter of what used to be a mansion of the wealthiest nineteenth-century resident of Winterthur, who donated paintings, mostly by German and Swiss Romantics, to the local Museum of Fine Arts and earned his enormous wealth through shameful trade in slaves; two other quarters of this rather beautiful house are also rented.
- <sup>9</sup> After the dissolution of the Soviet Union millions of guest workers from its former republics moved to Russia.
- <sup>10</sup> I remember composer Vladimir Martynov (b. 1946) referring in our conversations to the music of King Crimson as a "work of genius" and a major influence on his own creative work since the 1970's.
- <sup>11</sup> A clear reference to the first decade of post-Soviet life.
- <sup>12</sup> Vital organs for any human organism: a cleaner of toxins and a pump for blood.
- <sup>13</sup> Although in the 1990's some of those who were born and went through elementary school in Imperial Russia, including my own grandmother, were still alive.

- 14 Pen name of Igor Lotaryov (1887–1941), a hugely successful practitioner of an ego-futuristic brand of pop-poetry, who in 1918 in Moscow was elected by his numerous admirers as “a king of all poets.” In his poem titled State-Before-Resurrection (Предвоскресенье) Igor-Severyanin (Igor-the-Northerner, he insisted it was one long word), with his customarily ecstatic tone, speaks of an inevitable return to life of a “strange country” to the “East of the Ural Mountains,” i.e., Russia, which will occur after a period of civil strife and according to “God’s will.” In contrast, Chernykh’s own tone in *Camena* is rather restrained.
- 15 A deliberately confrontational name for a series, for it implied that all those who didn’t publish with “Russian Gulliver” belonged to a crazy wonderland of literary Lilliputians, Laputans, and yahoos.
- 16 And an admirer of Aleksandr Mironov (1948–2010), a St. Petersburg underground poet, who achieved his “fringe cult genius” status by the 2000’s. Chernykh is always very precise with the details.
- 17 As Sergey Zavyalov pointed out to me, the Võro language was a language Kaplinski heard and spoke in his childhood, yet it is hard to assess to what degree it could be considered his mother tongue.
- 18 We met on 22 April 2015 in Moscow, where Jaan accepted the Russian Prize for Poetry, a now defunct major award for the Russian authors living outside Russia. This prize had been awarded to him for his debut poetry collection in *Russian White Butterflies of the Night* (Tallinn, 2014).
- 19 Prior to independence, which Estonia gained for the first time through the 1918–1920 war of independence, which was part of a larger civil conflict in the territory of the former Russian Empire between the Bolsheviks and their opponents, the working languages at the University of Tartu were German and Russian.
- 20 The story was published the same year in the November issue of the St. Petersburg magazine *Zvezda*.
- 21 Since this poem is unpublished, this is how this stanza reads in Russian: “Кончается книга, рассказ обо мне,/рассказ, что написан чужими руками./Проснусь ли в чужом или собственном сне,/в чужой стороне, за другими реками?”
- 22 Entry in R. M. Rilke’s diary as quoted in the speech of the German president F. W. Steinmeier On the Occasion of the Restitution of St. Peter’s and Paul’s Cathedral in Moscow, on 17 October 2017 <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2017/10/171025-Moscow.html> (accessed on 28 October 2022).
- 23 During our discussion of an earlier draft of this essay Natalia Chernykh informed me that she was asked to write an internal review of the *White Butterflies of the Night* for the Russian Prize Committee. Her very positive review might have played a role in Committee’s final decision.
- 24 In 2018 Sergey Zavyalov was a member of the Andrei Bely Prize Committee and cast his vote for Kaplinski.
- 25 Reference to Mark 10:12: “Rising from the dead suffer many things and be set at nought”.
- 26 In some versions of Russian slang could also mean ‘the abortions’.
- 27 Cf. Mark 5: 30.
- 28 Cf. Mark 5: 34.
- 29 Or γυαστήριον, an Ancient Greek, Roman, or Byzantine workshop, a small retailer store, or a combination of both.
- 30 Dimitrie Kantemiroglu, or Dimitrie Cantemir, or Dimitrij Konstantinovich Kantemir (1673–1723) was an Ottoman, Moldavian, and Russian multilingual writer, composer, and statesmen. A voivode of Moldavia appointed by Turks, he eventually sided with fellow Eastern Orthodox Russians, and after 1711 had a distinguished career within the Russian government (he died as a senator). His earlier works composed in Constantinople included musicological treatise *Edvar-i Musiki* and dozens of musical compositions (which enjoyed recent revival in Turkey and Western Europe). His son was a great Russian poet and diplomat Antioch Kantemir. The heritage of the Cantemir (Kantemir) family is equally celebrated in Moldova, Romania, and Russia (including Moscow), where many places are named after them.
- 31 Paraphrase of Luke 6: 24–25: “But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep”.
- 32 Paraphrase of Luke 22: 42.
- 33 Reference to Mark 10: 25: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”.
- 34 ‘Evening prayer’ in Uzbek.
- 35 Uzbek names for a ‘mat for prayer’.
- 36 Inspired by Koran sura 3, ayat 177; sura 4, ayat 56.
- 37 Cf. Koran, sura 3, ayat 145.
- 38 Churka in Russian, a slur applied to the natives of former Soviet republics of Central Asia who don’t speak Russian well.
- 39 Cf. Koran, sura 3, ayat 21.
- 40 ‘Night prayer’ in Uzbek.
- 41 Arabic for ‘Jesus, son of Mary.’
- 42 Arabic for ‘Messiah’.
- 43 He greets them in Mordvinian (Erzya), one of the Finno-Ugric languages of the Volga region.

- 44 A diminutive Mordvinian form of Alexander.
- 45 A diminutive Russian form of Roman.
- 46 Mark 15: 34 and Matthew 27: 46 as translated into Mordvinian by Makar Yesevyev; quoted from the 1910 Mordvinian edition of the New Testament (Господа нашего Иисуса Христа Святое Евангелие отъ Матѳея, Марка, Луки и Иоанна на мордовскомъ языкѣ. Казань, 1910. С. 82).
- 47 Mark 15: 34 and Matthew 27: 46.
- 48 One of the killers finally speaks to a tractor driver in Mordvinian (Erzya).
- 49 The dreams of Pharaoh (Genesis 41: 1–7), later interpreted, and therefore correctly “dreamed,” by Joseph (Genesis 41: 24–33).
- 50 Cf. Genesis 41: 5–7.
- 51 Cf. Genesis 41: 1–4.
- 52 A reference to Potiphar’s wife: “And it came to pass after these things, that his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me” (Genesis 39: 7).
- 53 Cf.: “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, in Ramah was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not” (Matthew 2: 17–18).
- 54 Gangrene.
- 55 This poem seems to be a commentary on the words of Christ: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22: 21) and the Russian saying: “Not everything that glitters is gold”.
- 56 Cf. the initial and final words of the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible . . . And I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen”.
- 57 (Ivanov 1994, 1: 540), from a poem published in 1955, in the émigré Russian periodical *The New Review* (New York). Letters Ъ, Ы, and Ъ were struck from the Russian alphabet by the Bolshevik decree of 1918. Yet Ъ was partially restored to the alphabet by the 1960’s as a separation sign between letters indicating consonants and letters Е, Ё, Ю, Я.
- 58 More commonly known under his penname “Vladimir Lenin”.
- 59 German name of the Estonian city of Tartu.
- 60 Some trades in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg were in the hands of the local Finnish population.
- 61 The most beautiful public garden in St. Petersburg, full of sculptures. It dates back to the early eighteenth century.
- 62 A city in Northwestern Russia, distinguished for its medieval architecture.
- 63 World War II.
- 64 This poem was composed on the island of Madeira, in the very middle of Atlantic Ocean.
- 65 Reference to John 2: 13–16.
- 66 “Triumph of communism, peace in the whole world, self-determination of nations” were typical Soviet slogans of the Leonid Brezhnev era (1970’s and early 1980’s).
- 67 “To die for faith, czar, and Motherland” was a typical patriotic slogan of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Czarist Russia.
- 68 An Upper Palaeolithic female limestone figurine found in 1908 near Willendorf village in Austria.
- 69 Reference to a keyboard, also to Jacob’s ladder (Genesis: 28: 10–17) and spiritual ladder of Plato and Platonic philosophers.
- 70 At the beginning of his spiritual journey in *Divine Comedy* Dante meets three beasts: a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf.
- 71 Cf. for example the number of canti (thirty-three) in Dante’s *Purgatorio*.
- 72 Dante’s purgatory is a conic structure (a mountain) with the trees of earthly paradise (*paradiso terrestre*) on top, while sky and open space are the realm of paradise.
- 73 A citadel in the center of any medieval Russian city. Since Moscow Kremlin is a relatively new, late fifteenth century work of the Florentine architects, Kaplinski is most likely talking about Pskov Kremlin parts of which date back to the tenth century.
- 74 A reference to Jacob’s dream in which he encountered and fought with God, Who changed Jacob’s name to Israel (Genesis 32: 24–30).

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